

REVIEW: ‘Medusa’ a wry, poetic take on teen terror

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The Greeks have a story for everything. Whatever psychological conundrum we face today, it's likely that someone 3,000 years ago sat down and made up a story about it. They have a great deal to say about parenthood in Barbara Lau's play "Raising Medusa," which premiered last night at Riverside Theatre in Iowa City.

When a poet (Nancy Youngblut) can't find the words to connect to her teenage daughter Maddie (Laura Tatar), a Greek Chorus steps in. As sparks fly between mother and daughter, Lau tells us the story of Medusa to tell us the story of Maddie, who must become repulsive to become free.

Director Mary Sullivan treats this material with an eye for dramatic tension and a love of the outrageous. The piece crackles with intensity and lively humor. The Chorus (Jody Hovland, Kristy Hartsgrove and Jaclyn June Johnson) is funny and playful, mixing classical verse with nursery rhymes, mystery with whimsy, and sage advice with wry humor.

Mother is myopic and self-indulgent at times, and the play often withdraws from the action and takes a contemplative turn. This is forgivable, however, because we do see a lot of ourselves in her; the raising of children can seem a Herculean task at times.

On the other hand, being a teen sucks. Your body betrays you, social life becomes increasingly awkward, what you once held dear now seems stifling, and outside the door looms a neurotic, desperate parent who seems to think you're some sort of monster.

What's remarkable about "Raising Medusa" is that it puts forth both perspectives boldly, with humor and pathos, even as the tension degenerates into brutal conflict. Mother's attempts at connecting are genuine, though often misguided, and Maddie's rage and restlessness are very organic and immediately recognizable.

Given the central metaphor, Maddie could easily become a cartoon, an indecipherable teen addicted to junk culture and hell-bent on defiance. Tatar's performance, however, is nuanced, very human and very believable. Without her honesty and care, her intimate understanding of the physicality of adolescence, this could easily be a piece for frightened mothers alone.

It's not, however. As the lights rise at the end of the first act, I overhear the teenagers and young adults sitting near me in the audience talking about the play. Many see themselves, or a close friend, in the character of Maddie. Others are insightful enough to realize that they may be Mother before too long. The piece hits them head on; they are hooked, drawn in by the intensity of the drama and open to the philosophy of the themes.

Scott Olinger's set is simple and practical while broadly evocative. Desk, couch and bed mark out areas in the modern home. Greek pillars remind us of the eternal. The set is very large, giving director and cast room to play, but when necessary, the lighting design shrinks the space, making it tight, almost claustrophobic.

The costume design (Renee M. Bell) is wonderful; the traditional Greek clothes on the Chorus take us into its world immediately. One might expect a more monstrous Medusa, perhaps, but the few small snakes in her hair do the job. Maddie herself goes through a transformation in terms of fashion trends; simple sweater and braids gradually give way to something off the cover of *Spin*.

Donald J. Chamberlain's sound design keeps the aural world of the play flowing, working as accompaniment to the poems, filling in for an angry rock spasm here and a nostalgic memory there. Without this attention paid to the world of sound, the transitions between poetic monologue and more traditional drama would be rather awkward.

This all serves to create a piece that is beautiful, whimsical and sometimes frightening. Mother and Maddie go on a dramatic journey that is as personal as it is universal. So if you're struggling with a little Medusa of your own, or preparing to become one, you're not alone. The struggle is as old as drama itself.

"Raising Medusa" runs at Riverside Theatre through April 19. For tickets, call (319) 338-7672 or click [here](#).

www.riversidetheatre.org.